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ABSTRACT

Recognition of gender as a significant factor in the social parameters of language is a very recent phenomonon. The external aspects of language as they relate to sexism have social and political ramifications. Using Peirce's definition of sign, which encompasses the representation, the object, and its interpretation, sexually stereotypic language can be assessed. On the first iconic/metaphorical level, substituting "woman" (object) with various other terms, e.g., chick, girl, doll, fox (representation), characterizes woman as irresponsible, childish, small, useless, and deceitful. On the second level of indexical sign, the language patterns of females, which tend to avoid swearing and rough language, have also helped to foster women's societal position as secondary to men. Legislation in this area, which makes it a criminal offense to talk in a vulgar or obscene manner in the presence of women, actually furthers subjugation by equating women with children. Differences in male and female adjective selection, females' use of a question intonation in assertive utterances, modal constructions signaling doubtfulness or uncertainty are all examples of sex-related language patterns. Peirce's model allows us to be aware of relationships and underlying themes within such speech habits which, thus, cannot be easily dismissed as trivial. That "man" and "he" as symbolic signs fail to represent males and females equally, has been documented in several empirical studies. The prolific use of "man" in the generic sense has served to exclude women from professions, education, and government. If Peirce is right, the outcome of the feminist struggle to bring about language changes may determine their success in instituting changes in all areas. (BL)

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OUR PERCEPTION OF WOMAN AS DETERMINED BY LANGUAGE

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Our Perception of Women as Determined by Language

Abstract

Recognition of gender as a significant factor in the social parameters of language is a very recent phenomenon. It is only within the past few years that serious cognizance has been paid to the pervasiveness of gender differentiation in the English language and the implications of this for those of us who learn the language. Many feminists argue that the entrenchment of gender in language is an important contributing factor to the perpetuation of a patriarchal society which maintains male privilege and female subservience.

Critics of the feminist position characteristically urge that while sexism in general may be a bad thing, sexist language is of trivial consequence, and that those who worry about it rob themselves of time and energy to devote to the more important social and political facets of sexism. This paper presents an argument that sexist language is far from trivial--that it has practical implications of paramount importance for how people think and how they act. The argument is developed through an application of Charles Peirce's tri-partite conception of sign as icon, index, and symbol to three central features of the feminist complaint of linguistic sexism. In particular: the use of certain substitute terms for "woman" which are not literally equivalent, and in some cases not even literally related, is explored for its iconic significance; the existence of "genderlects," or language patterns peculiar to females and to males, is explored for its indexical significance; and the wide use of the so-called generic terms "man" and "he," which purport to refer equally

to males and females, but in fact do nothing of the kind, is explored for its symbolic significance.

The paper urges that when children learn to speak a language, they learn more than rules of syntax; they internalize, as well, models which will govern their behaviour, their expectations, their aspirations, and their very patterns of thought. While the internal structure of language may be accounted for by phonetic, syntactic, and semantic postulates, the external aspects of language merge with social and political considerations. Those of us engaged in teaching language should be as sensitive to the implications of these external features as we have traditionally been to the internal ones.

Recognition of gender as a significant factor in the social parameters of language is a very recent phenomenon. It is only within the past few years that serious cognizance has been paid to the pervasiveness of gender differentiation in the English language and the implications of this for those of us who learn the language. Many feminists argue that the entrenchment of gender in language is an important contributing factor to the perpetuation of a patriarchal society which maintains male privilege and female subservience.

Critics of the feminist position characteristically urge that while sexism in general may be a bad thing, sexist language is of trivial consequence, and that those who worry about it rob themselves of time and energy to devote to the more important social and political facets of sexism. This paper presents an argument that sexist language is far from trivial -- that it has practical implications of paramount importance for how people think and how they act. When children learn to speak a language, they learn more than rules of syntax; they internalize, as well, models which will govern their behaviour, their expectations, their aspirations, and their very patterns of thought. While the internal structure of language may be accounted for by phonetic, syntactic, and semantic postulates, the external aspects of language merge with social and political considerations.

In this paper, Charles Peirce's tri-partite conception of sign as icon, index, and symbol is applied to three central features of feminist concerns with language. In particular: the use of certain substitute terms for "woman" which are not literally equivalent, and in some cases not even literally related, is explored for its iconic significance; the existence of "genderlects", or language patterns peculiar to females and to males, is explored for its indexical significance; and the wide use of the so-called

generic terms "man" and "he", which purport to refer equally to males and females, but in fact do nothing of the kind, is explored for its symbolic significance.

I shall now proceed to summarize Peirce's definition of "sign" and three specific types of sign. For Peirce, a sign is always part of a genuine triadic relationship. The elements of the relationship are the sign itself (or the "representamen"), the object which the sign represents, and the interpretation (or "interpretant") of the sign (2.274).[1] Although Peirce developed several different modes of analysing the sign relationship, I shall limit my discussion to the most well-known of these modes. In this analysis, Peirce distinguishes different varieties of signs on the basis of the relationship between the sign and its object. Thus an icon is a sign capable of representing its object by virtue of a real similarity between it and its object -- a highway sign depicting a curve in the road is an example of an icon; an index is a sign capable of representing its object by virtue of its being really affected by its object -- the mercury column of a thermometer is an indexical sign of the room temperature; a symbol is a sign capable of representing its object "by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (2.299) -- the checkerboard sign for danger performs symbolically.

I shall now apply this explication of sign to the three particular issues of sexually stereotypic language listed earlier. My approach will be to state and discuss the implications of considering the various substitute terms for "woman" as iconic signs, the implications of considering the language patterns peculiar to females as indexical signs, and finally the implications of considering the pseudo-generic terms "man" and "he" as symbolic signs.

Following Peirce's analysis, the implications of the perceived suitability of substituting "girl," "chick," "fox," "doll," "dog," or "filly"[2] for "woman," that is, the implications of the perceived iconic relationship between girls, chicks, foxes, dolls, dogs, or fillies and women are devastating. From the common occurrence of these substitutions in both spoken and written English, one can make certain inferences about the beliefs of the language community. From the very common metaphorical identification of women as girls we can infer that the language community perceives certain parallelisms or similarities to exist between the representamen ("girls") and its object (women). Obvious candidates for inclusion would be irresponsibility, youthful appearance, childishness, vulnerability, innocence, and need for parental protection. Without assuming that the language community perceived such parallelisms to exist, we could not explain what renders the word "girl" "fit to be a representamen" (2.276) of its object, a woman. Even more frightening is the list of perceived similarities which permit "chick" to iconically designate a woman -- fluffiness, warmth, cuteness, smallness, uselessness, noisiness, cuddliness, weakness, and empty-headedness. To substitute the term "fox" for "woman" is to assume that foxes and women share such characteristics as deceitfulness, a sly intelligence, a sleek beauty, a predatory nature, and that both are fair game for the chase where the hunter, man, tries to outfox and trap them. It would be easy to extend this list of icons, specifying the similarities implied by substituting for "woman" such terms as "doll," "bunny," "filly," "hag," and "dog."

To understand "girl," "chick," and "fox" as iconically designating women reveals the demeaning implications of our substituting these terms

for "woman". Such substitution implies that both the speaker and the listener who accepts without objection this usage perceive women as being child-like, immature, in need of parental protection, weak, noisy, stupid, vulnerable, sly, deceitful, predatory, good sport to hunt, as well as cute, sweet, warm, soft, fluffy, and beautiful. When nearly all speakers of the English language support this iconic identification through their language habits, the implications are serious indeed. In terms of Peirce's analysis, it is impossible to view feminists' attempts to initiate change in such language patterns as misguided or trivial. In fact, following Peirce, such language changes would be indispensible to creating an atmosphere conducive to equality between women and men.

I shall now discuss the implications of considering the language patterns peculiar to females as indexical signs. First I shall provide some specific examples of these speech patterns. In their choice of words generally, women tend to avoid swearing and rough language. Society supports this "sensibility" on the part of the female sex, and considerable pressure is exerted on males not to use vulgar language or tell seamy jokes in the presence of women. Even the law has in the past reflected society's reluctance to expose women to bad language; there are many examples of legislation which make it a criminal offence to talk in a vulgar or obscene manner in the presence of a woman. Some examples of such legislation follow. According to the state code of Alabama,

> . . . any person who in the presence or hearing of any girl or woman, uses abusive, insulting, or obscene language shall, on conviction, be fined not more than two hundred dollars, and may also be imprisoned in the county jail, or sentenced to hard labor for the county for not more than six months.[3]

Presumably, Alabama considers the exposure of a woman to abusive language

more criminal than the exposure of a young boy to such language. In New Jersey, the Statutes Annotated read that, "Any person who, wilfully and wantonly sends or conveys to any female an indecent, obscene or lascivious letter or communication is guilty of a misdemeanor."[4] Arizona's Revised Statutes specify that "A person who, in the presence or hearing of any woman or child, or in a public place, uses vulgar, abusive or obscene language, is guilty of a misdemeanor."[5] North Dakota has similar legislation, stating that "Any person who shall utter or speak any obscene or lascivious language or words in any public place or in the presence of females, or of children under ten years of age. . . is guilty of a misdemeanor."[6]

In 1948 a woman was arrested, under the Alabama law dealing with obscenity, for uttering the word "damn" in the presence of other females. She was reported to have said, during a heated argument with her husband in a public restaurant, "I'm going to Tuscaloosa and get me a damn job and you can take the baby."[7] No other females in the room actually heard her utter the obscene word, but this fact was considered irrelevant.

It is important to recognize that these customs and laws which "protect" women from the harshness of language and life in general have not come cheaply. Women have paid dearly for their privileges as ladies. "Once the status of women was identified in legislation and court opinions with that of children (and slaves and the insane), denying the female the rights and duties expected by and from a male became not only easier but apparently logical and legal."[8] What appear on the surface to be instances of a reverence for femininity, such as not swearing the presence of women, and giving them special respect and even special titles, turn out under closer examination to be very effective subjugation techniques whose cumulative result is to keep "women out of the running."[9] As late as 1966, the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld "a statute which excluded women from jury duty "[10]

on the grounds that it was unfitting to expose ladies to the obscene language of the courtroom. Women were barred from legal practice for many years on similar grounds.[11]

Adjective selection also serves to distinguish female from male speech. While males and females are both likely to use such adjectives as "great", "terrific," "cool," and "neat," only females tend to use "adorable," "charming," "sweet," "lovely," and "divine."[12]

The question intonation used in assertive utterances is another specifically female speech habit. For example, an interviewer asks an applicant for a job, "How many children do you have?" and she answers "Three?" Although she knows perfectly well that "three" is the correct answer to this question, the rising voice intonation may be interpreted as reluctance on her part to make any categorical declaration.

The modal construction which usually signals doubtfulness or uncertainty[13] is more characteristic of female than male speech. Examples of modals in English are the words "can," "could," "shall," "should," "will," "would," "may," and "might." In summary, "males adopt a more direct forceful way of talking, females a more tentative, questioning approach. What one typically phrases as a statement or command the other formulates as a request."[14]

It is important to point out that female speech patterns are not necessarily inferior to male speech patterns. In certain respects, such as supportiveness, politeness, sensitivity, and cheerfulness, female speech patterns are clearly superior to those of males.[15] What I am particularly interested in exploring in this paper, however, is not the fallacy of the "male as norm" assumption governing our notions of linguistic adequacy, but the fairly standard interpretation of female speech patterns as exhibiting lack of confidence, indirectness, and extreme reluctance to make a categorical claim.

The use of interruption is readily identified as a male speech characteristic, particularly when the interrupted speaker is female.[16] In fact, cross-sex interruption patterns differ widely from same-sex patterns. In same-sex conversations, interruption seems to be an idiosyncratic affair, depending largely on the nature and disposition of the participants. In cross-sex conversations, however, the interruption of females by males appears to be systematic and far less dependent on the nature and disposition of the participants.[17]

I will attempt to show that these sex-related language patterns are captured by Peirce's notion of indexical sign and then discuss the implications of this. According to Peirce,

> The Index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established. (2.299)

Peirce gives the following examples of indices:

> I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters, and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something of the sort. . . . A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focuses the attention is an index. (2.285)

Our examples of sex-related language patterns fit easily with Peirce's examples of indices. The utterance "What a divine cheese cake!" is as probable an indication that the speaker is female as a rolling gait is indicative of a sailing person. Consistent interruption of a speaker of the other sex provides as reliable evidence that the interrupter is male as corduroys, gaiters, jacket, and bowlegged condition that the person thus described is a jockey.

The application of Peirce's notion of sign to sex-related speech patterns helps illustrate some features of these language habits. First, applying Peirce's theory here prompts us to ask what such usage is a sign

of, causing us to amass separate instances of such speech, and making us aware of relationships and underlying themes within such speech habits. Thus these habits cannot be easily dismissed as trivial or insignificant. If we apply Peirce's notion of indexical significance, we cannot exempt male speakers' consistent interruption of females on the grounds that there was no conscious intent to undermine the importance of the females' right to speak. Regardless of whether the male speakers' consistent interruption of females is interpreted, either by the speaker or anyone else, as undermining the significance of what females have to say, such behaviour does nevertheless signify a disregard for the language input of females. In other words, the significance of such behaviour is independent of its being understood to have this significance.

I shall now discuss the implications of considering the pseudo-generic terms "man" and "he" as symbolic signs. There is no difficulty in realizing that these words do, in fact, operate as symbols. Peirce says, "The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (2.299). "Man" and "he" have been arbitrarily designated to signify their objects, and were it not for the interpretant's understanding of and acquiescence in this convention, there would be no connection between the representamen and object, and such words would cease to signify. In Peirce's words, "A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant" (2.304).

The claim was made above that the word "man" is not truly generic because even when it is used in its general sense of "Human being", it fails to refer equally to male and female humans, primarily suggesting males. Several studies[18] have given empirical support to this claim. One such

research project was carried out on university sociology students in 1972 by Joseph Schneider and Sally Hacker, two sociologists who illustrated that the terms "social man", "industrial man", and "political man" suggest social, industrial, and political males exclusively. According to Schneider and Hacker,

> in the minds of students of both sexes, use of the word man evoked, to a statistically significant degree, images of males only -- filtering out recognition of women's participation in these major areas of life -- whereas the corresponding headings ["society", "industrial life", and "political behaviour"] without man evoked images of both males and females. In some instances the differences reached magnitudes of 30 to 40 per cent.[19]

Thus this reseach supports the feminist claim that the word "man," even when used in its purportedly generic sense, excludes females. By extension, terms like "fireman," "mailman," "policeman," "chairman," and "salesman" filter out the notion of a female as being a proper object of such representamens. Nor is there any reason to doubt that at least as strong a case could be made for the predominantly male import of the personal pronoun "he", even when used in its supposedly generic role.

Applying Peirce's notion of symbol to these pseudo-generic terms helps to illustrate their full significance. Peirce describes a symbol as "a conventional sign, or one depending upon habit (acquired or inborn)" (2.297). "Symbols grow," says Peirce. "It is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. . . . A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows" (2.302). Thus we should not expect the frequent occurrence of such terms to be a trifling matter. The prolific use of "man" in the generic sense, excluding women from the language, has played its part in excluding women from the professions, the apprentice trades, higher education, and government as well. According to Julia P. Stanley, "Male omnipresence in our vocabulary is . . . one of the ways in which women have been kept invisible in our society

when they moved beyond their traditional roles."[20]

It is important that we come to recognize the symbolic significance of our referring to human beings via terms that are predominantly male in their reference, as well as the related economic significance of referring to various occupations with terms that suggest the unsuitability of females. Only when we understand the symbolic significance of such word usage, can we estimate the importance of piecing together new symbols which are fairer in their assumptions as well as in their implications.

If we take a Peircean view of the life cycle of symbols, however, we will be wary of regarding the implementation of such changes as facile. We have only the old symbols to work from, and the shortcomings of these cannot simply be cancelled by fiat. Although symbols are only arbitrary signs of their objects, this does not imply that the interpretants can simply change the rule linking symbol and object. That is, the rules can be changed, but we should not expect the reflection of this change in language usage to be a simple matter, for conventions governing symbols are akin to language habits. Old habits may be outgrown and new ones established, but this process will be neither fast nor easy. Furthermore, the inadequacies of old habits will be transmitted to the new ones for a long time to come. On the other hand, there is room for some optimism, for each instance in which clearer, fairer, and more appropriate symbols are instituted will spread "among the peoples", and grow in use and experience.

These three features of linguisitic sexism are not unrelated. On the first level, that of iconic sign, our metaphorical references to women occur. Thus the words "girl," "chick," and "fox" symbolically signify female children, chickens, and foxes, but iconically signify women; this is because they are perceived as suggesting certain qualities common to both

women and girls, chickens, and foxes. Among these suggested qualities are innocence, vulnerability, noisiness, empty-headedness, and slyness.

Thus it is no accident that on the second level, that of indexical sign, we find evidence of speech patterns which are widely perceived as reflecting these assumptions about women. We find mild language, conspicuously devoid of lewdness and vulgarity (suggesting the innocence of the child). In this regard, even the speech patterns of men significantly alter in the presence of women. Conventional rules of etiquette, for example, demand that women be protected from hearing foul or obscene language (suggesting the vulnerability of the child). Women's speech contains many more qualifying terms and modal verbs. This may give the impression that women do a lot of talking without ever coming right out and saying anything (suggesting the noisiness and the empty-headedness of a chick). Similarly, women's speech is very indirect, and even straightforward assertions are frequently masked with the rising intonation patterns appropriate for questions (suggesting, perhaps, deviousness and the sly intelligence of the fox).

Consequently it should come as no surprise that one of the terms most frequently used in English to refer to human beings, "man", systematically excludes women. For chickens, foxes, dolls, fillies, and dogs are not human beings. Neither are young children generally considered full-fledged human beings with all the pertinent rights and responsibilities of adults. When we talk of important events and the human beings who shape them, there is no need for us to take account of the behaviour of chickens, foxes, dolls, fillies, and dogs, and seldom any need to take serious account of the behaviour of children (except insofar as children require the protection of adults). Thus, from our observations about sexist language on the iconic

and indexical levels, it is but one short step to simply excluding women from our conception of humanity via the symbolic import of words like "man."

Historically, language has been the most important characteristic used to differentiate the human from the beast. That this same language which is attributed with distinguishing us from the lower animals should metaphorically identify women with these animals is not a trivial happenstance; it is one of the cornerstones of the subjugation of women. Let us not be deceived; feminists' concerns with language are not trivial. If Peirce is right, the outcome of the feminist struggle to bring about changes in language may determine their success in instituting changes in all areas.

> For every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones. (2.222)

Those who argue for the triviality of language issues, in feminism or any other area, should listen more closely to Peirce's admonition that "it is wrong to say that a good language is important to good thought merely; for it is of the essence of it" (2.220)!

FOOTNOTES

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (8 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), Volume 2, Paragraph 274. All future references to the Collected Papers will be made in the text by volume and paragraph number. Thus, in "2.274," "2" indicates the volume and "274" the paragraph.

2. Most of these terms are listed by Robert Baker, in " 'Pricks' and 'Chicks': A Plea for 'Persons'", Philosophy and Sex, ed. R. Baker and F. Ellison (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1975), p. 51. Baker also lists, as metaphorical substitutes for "woman" the following: "bird," "filly," "bitch," "babe," "doll," "skirt," and "hem."

3. Haig Bosmajian, "Sexism in the Language of Legislatures and Courts," Sexism and Language, by Alleen Pace Nilsen et al. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), pp. 92-93.

4. Ibid, p. 92.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, p. 93.

8. Ibid, p. 97.

9. Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language; With a Comprehensive Bibliography (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), p. 102.

10. Bosmajian, p. 89.

11. Ibid, p. 82.

12. Robin Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p. 12.

13. The examples of modal verbs which I give are taken from Key, pp. 75-76. It is important to point out that the use of the modal often indicates greater politeness rather than less certainty, however. For example, "Would you open the door" is more polite than "Open the door." Politeness in language is a valuable feature, and one that should not be given up lightly.

14. Casey Miller and Kate Swift, Words and Women (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), p. 108.

15. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, "Differences and Dominance: An Overview of Language, Gender, and Society," Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Series in Socio-linguistics, Series editor Roger W. Shuy; Howley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers Inc , 1975). p. 24. See also Key, p. 72.

16. Key, p. 130.

17. Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, "Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation," Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (Series in Socio-linguistics, series editor Roger W. Shuy; Howley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers Inc., 1975), pp. 116-117.

18. One study supporting this thesis is Linda Harrison's "Cro-Magnon Woman -- In Eclipse," The Science Teacher (April, 1975), pp. 8-11.

19. Miller and Swift, p. 21.

20. Julia P. Stanley, "Gender-Marking in American English: Usage and Reference," Sexism and Language, by Alleen Pace Nilsen et al. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. 74.

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